1:Srinivas E-5 (1940-42)1952 AW5 Coorg AW5

with having deserted Kāvēri for Kanaké, a semi-divine woman, who later assumed the form of a river, joining the Kāvēri at Bhāgamandḷa. This annoyed Agastya who cursed his disciples, 'Brahmins of Matsyadēsha [traditional name for Coorg in the Sanskritic myths], let not the people of this land obey you. Let them not give you enough to support you.' The distressed disciples appealed to Mother Kāvēri against her husband's curse. She took pity on them and told them that so long as they believed in her they would not find it difficult to support themselves.

In November 1834 some Amma Coorgs donned the sacred thread at Balmuri on the banks of the Kāvēri. They became followers of the Brahmin monastery (*maṭha*) in Rāmachandrapura in Shimoga District in Mysore State. In 1847 the head of this monastery sent them instructions as to the ritual they were entitled to perform. Amma Coorgs from Kiggaṭnāḍ who had not donned the sacred thread in 1834 did so a few years later at the Irpu temple under the auspices of the Brahmin monastery at Kānūr in Uḍipi in South Canara. Sometime afterwards a few Amma Coorgs who still remained unattached to a monastery became disciples of the monastery at Subramaṇya in South Canara.[1]

Amma Coorgs exemplify a tendency which has always been present in the caste system: a small group of people break off from a larger whole of which they are a part, Sanskritize their customs and ritual, and achieve a higher status than their parent-body in the course of a few decades.

The main body of Coorgs do not contain any subdivisions today, but formerly, during the time of the Rājas, they were divided into two groups called 'Saṇṇa' and 'Malla' Coorgs. These are Kannaḍa, and not Koḍagi, terms, and elderly informants say that these terms were used only by the Kannaḍa-speaking outsiders and not by Coorgs themselves. This sounds somewhat far-fetched, though there does not seem to have been a sharp line dividing the Saṇṇa and Malla Coorgs. 'Saṇṇa' in Kannaḍa means 'small', and 'Malla' means 'big', and the terms were derived from the two different varieties of rice, one big and the other small. The latter variety is superior to the former, and Saṇṇa Coorgs regarded themselves as superior to Malla Coorgs.

Richter tells us that 'Saṇṇa Coorgs may originally have formed a small *nucleus connected with their Nāyakas or chiefs who were*

[1] N. Chinnappa, *Paṭṭōḷi Paḷamé*, pp. 20–21.

1:Srinivas E-5 (1940-42)1952 AW5 Coorg AW5

compatible. But not all Coorgs have horoscopes, and marriages are frequently arranged without resorting to the Kaṇiya astrologer.

Coorgs formerly resorted to the Kaṇiya on every conceivable occasion. If an ox strayed, or if someone was ill in the house, the Kaṇiya was consulted. It was believed that he was able to tell, by consulting the planets, whether the strayed ox would return and whether the patient would recover. Sometimes he suggested the performance of some rite which would enable, for instance, the ox which had strayed to return home and the patient to recover. Perhaps a minor deity or spirit like Guḷika, or an ancestral spirit, was annoyed because it had not received the necessary attention from the members of the particular joint family. The Kaṇiya would then suggest the performance of appropriate propitiatory ritual.

The Baṇṇa and Paṇika are two low castes, originally from Malabar, who are very similar to each other and who actually perform the ritual which the Kaṇiya prescribes for his Coorg client. These two castes stand in a relation similar to the one in which the dispensing chemist stands to the doctor in the Western world. The Kaṇiya says, for instance, that the ancestors of his client are angry because they have not been propitiated for a long time, and he suggests the performance of the *kāraṇava téré* which is an elaborate propitiation of ancestors lasting over a day. The Baṇṇa (or Paṇika) actually performs the elaborate ancestor-propitiation at which the ancestors of the Coorg joint family possess the Baṇṇa oracle.[1]

Each Baṇṇa family serves a group of villages which they are under an obligation to serve. Besides ancestor-propitiation and other occasions when their services are wanted by families, Baṇṇas play very important parts at the festivals of village-deities where they are oracles, dancers, and cutters of the sacrificial animals.

Coorgs come into contact with the blacksmith, carpenter, and goldsmith usually in non-ritual contexts. The blacksmith and carpenter make the agricultural implements and domestic articles, and also help in building the massive houses of Coorgs. Some of the articles made by them, like the bier and palanquin, are used on ritual occasions.

The goldsmith, in addition to making the gold and silver orna-

[1] Richter's *Manual of Coorg*, pp. 169–70, contains an example of the kind of service which the Kaṇiya performed with the aid of the Baṇṇa.

I: Srinivas E-5 (1940-42) 1952 AW5 Coorg AW5

prevails between the higher castes and Poleyas. For instance, Poleyas may not come out of their huts during the first eighteen days of the biennial festival of the deity Kētrappa at Bēngūr. It is believed that they will suffer some misfortune if they come out and see the festival-priests (*kāvukāras*) going about their sacred work.

Quite the opposite attitude prevails towards Poleyas at the festival of the Bhadrakāḷi of Kunda. The Poleya oracles have many duties at the festival, though they are not permitted to enter the temple of Bhadrakāḷi. They may not touch a high caste person, but they have the right of barring anyone from entering the temple. They stopped me presumably because they considered my dress—I was wearing a suit—improper, and they let me in only after a Coorg friend had explained who I was.

Ritual occasions might either emphasize the structural cleavages that normally exist between high and low castes, or they might tend to minimize them. The former leads, among other things, to the exclusion of the lower castes from ritual, while the latter leads to their inclusion. But inclusion does not mean that structural distance is abolished totally for the duration of the ritual occasion. What happens may be more accurately described by stating that certain individuals belonging to the low castes have ritual roles which place them temporarily in a superior position *vis-à-vis* the high castes.

At an ancestor-propitiation in a Coorg house, a Baṇṇa acts as oracle: he is possessed by each of the ancestor-spirits in turn, and while the possession lasts, he is identified with the particular ancestor possessing him. As the temporary vehicle of the spirit of an ancestor he is entitled to say and do things which he normally would not dream of saying and doing. As ancestor, he might censure the head of the joint family for not attending to his duties properly.

Nowadays young Coorgs who are sceptical about their traditional beliefs tend to see the Baṇṇa oracle at an ancestor-propitiation as an actor playing several roles in a play, and not as the vehicle of the spirits of their ancestors. A young Coorg told me that he had seen a Baṇṇa oracle saluting a big official while he was alleged to be possessed by an ancestor-spirit, and this was proof to him of the fact that all possessions were just make-believe and not real.

Another Coorg youth told me that while he was witnessing an ancestor-propitiation at a friend's house, the Baṇṇa oracle, address-

1:Srinivas E-5 (1940-42)1952 AW5 Coorg AW5

The spread of Sanskritization being a matter of spontaneous growth produces certain inconsistencies. For instance, the main body of Coorgs propitiate their dead ancestors by offering meat and liquor with the Baṇṇa acting as oracle, as well as by offering balls of rice-flour under the guidance of a Brahmin priest. Amma Coorgs, a Sanskritized division of Coorgs, make the inconsistency in the customs of the main body of Coorgs all the more glaring by observing annual *shrāddhas* (propitiation of ancestors with balls of rice using Sanskrit *mantras*) after the manner of Brahmins, and by completely eschewing the other mode of propitiation.

Many village-deities who are made out to be forms of Mahādēva (or Shiva), and goddesses who are made out to be Povvedi (i.e. Bhagavati, wife of Shiva), are offered meat and toddy. Side by side with these deities, Coorgs offer worship at the temples of Tala Kāvēri, Rāmēshwara in Irpu, and Omkārēshwara in Mercara, where the priests are Brahmins and Sanskrit *mantras* are used, and where only offerings of fruit and flowers are permitted.

Inconsistencies are also seen on the plane of belief. It has been mentioned earlier that the Coorg funeral song says that the man died because the ration of rice kept for him by God Nārāyaṇa was finished; and the survivors pray God not to cause the dead man to be reborn as living is synonymous with suffering. These ideas are entirely consistent with Sanskritic theology. But at another place in the funeral song the mourner says, 'Nārāyaṇa's thieving horde (*kaḷḷa paḍé*) came to kill you. Had I known it, I would have hacked the horde to pieces.' This is entirely consistent with the martial idiom of Coorgs, but inconsistent with the ideas of Sanskritic theology mentioned earlier.

As a rule, educated Coorgs turn more and more to Sanskritic deities, rites, and beliefs. The Rāmakrishṇa Mission is active in Coorg, and in recent years it has been responsible for carrying the message of philosophical Hinduism to Coorgs. In the last thirty years four Coorgs have become *sanyasis*, dedicating their lives to prayer and meditation and the active service of their fellow men. One of these *sanyasis* has a hermitage (*āshrama*) called appropriately *Kāvēri Āshrama*.